

The World Alliance of Reformed Churches and the Ecumenical Movement

Odair Pedroso Mateus
Exec. Secretary of the Dept of Theology and Ecumenism
of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (2000-2007)

I. The Lord's table is His, not ours

1. This happened exactly fifty years ago. Delegates at the Alliance's 1954 General Council, held in Princeton, USA, decided to clarify the meaning of the ecumenical movement for the WARC member churches. They produced a document called "The Reformed Churches and the Ecumenical Movement".

In that document, they spoke of the Lord's Table - the sacrament called "communion" which still divides Christians all over the world. Standing firmly in the Reformation tradition they said: The Table of the Lord is His, not ours. We dare not "refuse the sacrament to any baptized person who loves and confesses Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour". And they concluded: "We cannot proclaim the Gospel of reconciliation without demonstrating at the Table of the Lord that we are reconciled to one another".

II. The Reformation Roots of WARC's ecumenical engagement

2. What the delegates to the WARC's Princeton General Council stated fifty years ago demonstrates today that the Alliance is not only a fellowship of Congregational, United, Reformed and Presbyterian churches which are

"heirs of the Reformation". The Alliance is also a fellowship of Reformation churches committed to Christian reconciliation in general and to more visible oneness among its own member churches in particular. It is a confessional body ecumenically oriented.

3.Why is the Alliance equally Reformed and ecumenical? The Alliance has always grounded its ecumenical engagement on its Protestant roots. The Reformers of the 14th, 15th and 16th Centuries listened to the biblical message of God's grace and human freedom for the works of love. They confessed their faith and reformed the church and its structures according to the Gospel of grace and freedom for love. Standing in the apostolic tradition, they affirmed the early ecumenical creeds and made it clear that they were ready "to cross ten seas" to work for the visible unity of the Christian Church.

According to the biblical teaching of the Reformation, the Church of Jesus the Christ is not confined by this or that "church", this or that confessional tradition, this or that denomination or group. The Church exists where the Gospel of God's grace and human freedom, of justification and justice, is proclaimed and received in faith through the Holy Spirit and the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Table are administered according to the will of Jesus, the Christ.

As a result, the Church is primarily communion - the communion of saints, the communion of all believers who are members of a body whose sole Head is Jesus the Resurrected. There is no fundamental distinction or hierarchy among them. They were equally called by God's grace to celebrate and bear witness within the earth community to God's Kingdom of life in fullness, preached by Jesus of Nazareth and received in hope by his followers through the Holy Spirit. This communion of saints created by the Word cuts across or transcends this or that historical "church", this or that Protestant confessional tradition, this or that contemporary denomination or group.

It is because of what the Reformation movements did and said about the Church that since the beginning of the

modern ecumenical movement, the Alliance has committed itself to making more visible among Christian churches and its own member churches the gift of unity that binds together the communion of saints.

III. WARC and the ecumenical movement: official statements

4. Some statements made by the Alliance in recent decades illustrate very well this commitment. Two weeks before the creation of the World Council of Churches, in 1948, the Alliance's Executive Committee greeted that event as "a manifestation of the spirit and will of Jesus Christ". According to the 1949 Executive Committee, the Alliance was glad to be "in the large body of the World Council of Churches". Two years later the same Executive Committee stated that the true nature of a confessional Alliance was not to be an end but to serve "the Church Universal of Jesus Christ". If the confessional families "make their great world bodies ends in themselves, they will betray Jesus Christ".

According to the 1954 Princeton General Council, the ecumenical movement "is of God, not men, a sign of the work of the Holy Spirit". Ten years later, the Frankfurt General Council affirmed that the present disunited state of the Church "is sinful" and to tolerate this "is to be a sharer in the sin", thus denying "the meaning of our baptism".

The International Congregational Council and the World Alliance merged in 1970. Both organisations saw the scope of their union in 1970 "not only to carry out the major aims for which both organisations have existed separately, but above all in order better to serve the whole of Christ's Church".

According to the WARC Centennial Consultation, held in 1977, the Alliance, confronted by a plurality of churches, had a choice between "claiming to be the one true Church to which all others ought eventually to come and, on the other hand, seeking the fullness of Christ's

Church by entering into dialogue and fellowship with those other churches which share with us the Gospel". In tune with the spirit of Protestantism, the Alliance claims no monopoly on the Gospel. And the Centennial Consultation to conclude: "there is for us no alternative to involvement in the ecumenical movement".

IV. Some significant aspects of WARC's ecumenical engagement

5.The first aspect of the WARC ecumenical engagement that needs to be underlined today is, as it has been suggested already, the Alliance's constitutional commitment to the World Council of Churches, the so-called "privileged instrument" of the ecumenical movement. The Alliance went as far as questioning whether it should remain active beyond 1948, when the WCC was officially established. In the following years, it consistently reiterated that commitment and its willingness "to avoid unnecessary duplication of work that can best be done by the World Council of Churches".

6.The second aspect that needs to be underlined today is closely related to the first. In an ecclesial context of intense church union negotiations involving its member churches and in tune with the early stages of ecumenical theology, the Alliance gave clear indications that it attached special significance to local church union as the most important model of church fellowship even though it never officially rejected models of unity developed at further stages of the ecumenical movement.

7.The third aspect of the WARC ecumenical engagement that needs to be underlined is bilateral dialogues. Following the entering of many WARC member churches in church union negotiations as well as the ecumenical dynamics created in the late 1960s by the Roman Catholic Church's decision to engage in bilateral conversations with different world communions, the Alliance, like other similar world bodies, became actively involved in bilateral dialogues dealing with doctrinal and ecclesiastical issues that still divide Christian churches.

Bilateral dialogues remain the most substantial expression of the Alliance's engagement in the ecumenical movement today.

8.The fourth aspect is the Alliance's priority commitment to fellowship within the Reformation family. The first Alliance's General Council, held in 1877, dealt with Lutheran-Reformed relations. The Alliance welcomed in 1923 the movement that would later lead to the creation of the Lutheran World Federation in 1947 and the two world bodies have just accomplished a new round of exploratory conversations on the visible structures of the existing fellowship. In cooperation with a significant number of union negotiations involving Reformation denominations, WARC led during the 1980s a series of bilateral conversations with the Baptists, Anglicans, Methodists, Mennonites and the Disciples of Christ.

9.The fifth aspect of the WARC ecumenical engagement is its commitment to foster among its own member churches what the Alliance itself is searching to promote within the wider Christian family: more visible unity as a requirement to a more obedient witness.

Six out of eight WARC general councils held between 1948 and 1997 have mentioned or raised the issue of Reformed disunity. While Reformed churches are far more spiritually united than their number might suggest, they often divide for reasons that are hardly justifiable by a pluralism which is not only legitimate and desirable but also inherent to the Reformation heritage and to early Christianity. The creation and ministry of the World Alliance responds to a certain extent to the need to overcome divisions within the Reformed family.

In recent years, the Geneva based John Knox International Reformed Center has undertaken extensive research on this issue through consultations and a series of significant publications that include *The Reformed Family Worldwide*, in 1999. As a result, WARC and the John Knox Center have established, since 1998, the Project Mission in Unity. Its main focus is "to assist the witness of the Reformed churches: 1. As they respond to contemporary mission and missiological challenges, including life-

oriented initiatives in situations marked by economic, social, political, cultural or religious conflict; 2. As they seek to overcome their historical divisions; and 3. As they move forward together in their common witness".

V. Some Contemporary Challenges to the WARC's ecumenical engagement

10. The historical, religious, ecclesial and ecumenical contexts in which the Alliance has made its major ecumenical statements and outlined - yet in rather generic terms - its ecumenical engagement have undergone significant changes.

11. The North-western project to promote "civilisation" worldwide by opposing a liberal, modern, universal worldview to supposedly under-developed, traditional, local worldviews was challenged by anti-colonial struggles and a great variety civil-rights movement. It has transfigured itself into the empire myth of a global household built for all by the messianic forces of the free market.

Once considered the expression of sinful or primitive stages of human development, non-Christian religions play unexpected roles today everywhere as they provide societies and individuals with symbolic ways to adapt themselves to, to make sense of, to resist to or simply to survive within the heartless economic and cultural environment engendered nowadays by the "messianic" forces of the market often catalysed by Protestant oriented nations.

12. The engagement of many Christian women and men in different liberation struggles of the past and solidarity movements of the present has encouraged some churches to repent and redefine, in the light of the Word of God, their witness to the salvation that the God of the orphan, the widow and the foreigner brings to the world in the compassionate person of Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ.

As a result, the word "ecumenism", once and until recently used as world empires emerged, becomes increasingly inseparable from two other words of the same household root: ecology and economy. As Christianity changes its face as it moves eastward southward, the ecumenical movement becomes also a people's movement and the struggle against the divisive forces of economic exclusion, environmental destruction, cultural oppression and gender discrimination subsumes and judges today the reasons why Christian churches seek Christian unity and therefore the methods they employ to overcome what divides them.

13. Following a wider trend in Christianity, the World Alliance has also changed its face and has become an eastward-southward association of churches that are responding in a growing variety of ways to the new historical, cultural and religious situations in which they are called to witness to the Gospel today. They are facing ecumenical challenges and engaging in a growing variety of ecumenical encounters and ventures that neither aim necessarily at overcoming inherited faith-and-order divisions to bring forth formal fellowship nor limit themselves necessarily to the visible borders of Christianity.

These important changes in the historical, religious, ecclesial and ecumenical contexts in which the Alliance has formulated and stated the terms of its commitment to the ecumenical movement have challenged in different ways the consensus on the most relevant ways of serving in the international level the WARC member churches in their local ecumenical experiences and needs. In what follows we offer some examples of challenges that the WARC ecumenical engagement faces today.

14. Since his installation as WARC President in 1997, Prof. C.S. Song has consistently raised questions on the gap between the contemporary agenda of Geneva, based ecumenical organisations such as the World Council of Churches or the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, and the concerns and interests of Christian people on the pew.

While the former shape their agenda and language around issues such as faith and order divisions among Christian churches and economic injustice and ecological destruction, the latter both in the Northern and in the Southern hemispheres are locally engaged in the search for a spirituality that would help them keep their wholeness in a fragmented world. This leads President Song to suggest that the Alliance lives and operates today "conditioned by an ecumenical mindset developed more than a century ago" while it should "change itself inside out" to become the "Alliance of 75 million people".

15. Other voices within the World Alliance apply similar argument patterns to contend that given the ecumenical significance of southward-eastward face of the Alliance, its engagement in ecumenical bilateral dialogues which assume consensus in faith or doctrine as a key step towards church koinonia hardly corresponds to the ethos of the Reformed tradition and even less so to the present needs of its constituency.

16. As it gives priority to the dialogue between its member churches and other Reformation churches, the Alliance confronts a specific set of ecumenical tasks. One of them, dating back to the 1970s, concerns the most appropriate institutional ways whereby the Alliance and the Lutheran World Federation might express in the future the significant ecumenical developments that mark their recent common history in different parts of the world.

Another task has to do with the possibilities for the Alliance and the Lutheran World Federation to respond together, as Reformation communions both to the ongoing search for more international ecumenical space and to the call that the General Secretary of the World Council of Churches addressed in 2002 to Christian world communions to associate themselves with the WCC with a view to redesign the present international ecumenical configuration.

17. In the inner circle constituted by the Reformed family the Alliance faces three major ecumenical tasks of equal importance. The first one concerns the "development of comprehensive partnership" with the Ecumenical

Consultative Council of the Disciples of Christ "in pursuit of the vision of the two eventually becoming one". The second one concerns the need for the Reformed Ecumenical Council and the Alliance "to work in closer cooperation" for the benefit of their constituencies. The third one concerns the future of the John Knox-WARC Mission in Unity Projects as it seeks to go beyond general affirmations on union and disunion among the Reformed churches to catalyse in specific local situations initiatives towards Reformed cooperation and fellowship required by life-oriented mission challenges.

18.These and other questions related to the future of the ecumenical movement, to the future of the very precious contribution made by the Reformation family to the ecumenical movement as well as the remaining tasks related to fellowship among Reformed churches and Reformed families of churches suggest eloquently the need for the Alliance to consider anew the issue of the forms of its commitment to a Christian koinonia that ultimately serves the affirmation of life in fullness in a culturally and religiously plural world threatened by economic injustice and environmental degradation.